Voor het hoogste het beste

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Summary

Small brown booklets, handed out on streets, at markets, on trains and at fairs. They were probably the best-known method of evangelism in the nineteenth century: religious tracts. This genre of printed matter has an intriguing history that, however, has been largely ignored by historians so far. What made religious tracts so popular in the nineteenth century and far into the next? This study, entitled *The Best for the Highest. Anglo-Saxon Influences on Religious Tract Distribution in the Netherlands 1913-1959* pays special attention to the influence of the Anglo-Saxon world on Dutch publishers, starting with a major British influence at the beginning of the nineteenth century that lasted well into the twentieth century. After 1945 this British influence was increasingly replaced by an interest in American evangelism methods.

Religious tracts have been distributed since the invention of printing, but it was not until the end of the eighteenth century that they came to be used chiefly as a method of evangelism. In the nineteenth century an amazing number of tract societies mushroomed, printing religious tracts in numbers previously unheard of. Print runs of popular tracts could sometimes number more than one hundred thousand copies. This spectacular growth of religious tract distribution was made possible by advancing printing techniques. Inventions such as steam-driven presses and stereotype printing lowered the costs of printed matter and made larger print runs possible. For the first time in history, printed texts were brought within the means of the entire population, including the working classes.

However, the popularity of the religious tract was also the result of a religious revival in Britain (also noticeable in other parts of Europe) that had its roots in the eighteenth century. In the Anglo-Saxon world this had been the century in which preachers like George Whitefield and John Wesley had attracted great audiences, which sometimes resulted in large numbers of people spontaneously confessing their sins and having conversion-experiences. These revivals stood at the basis of the rise of the evangelical movement in

Britain and the United States. Evangelicals laid great stress on conversion and a personal relationship with God. Besides, they were well-known for their activism and missionary urge, made visibly by the great number of religious organizations they established, including overseas missions, bible and tract societies, home missions and Sunday school unions.

British religious societies, like the London Missionary Society (LMS), the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) and the Religious Tract Society (RTS), were not only active within the British Empire. They also worked in other countries, such as Germany, France and Spain. Wherever possible, these British societies stimulated the founding of similar organizations by local Protestants. This stimulating role of the British societies is also visible in the Netherlands. The *Nederlands Zendeling Genootschap* (Dutch Missionary Society; NZG), for instance, was modeled after the LMS (the first missionaries of the NZG were even sent to the mission field by the LMS), and the *Nederlands Bijbel Genootschap* (Dutch Bible Society; NBG) was established after a visit by BFBS-representative Robert Pinkerton. With regard to tract distribution, it is clear that the RTS played an active part in founding a Dutch tract society, the *Nederlands Godsdienstig Traktaat Genootschap* (Dutch Religious Tract Society; NGTG). The Dutch religious societies received valuable support from their British counterparts, ranging from financial help to practical advice and – in the case of the NGTG – permission to print Dutch translations of tracts published by the RTS. In many European countries, such as Germany, religious societies continued to be dependent on British support for a long time. In the Netherlands, however, the societies quickly became self-reliant. This caused a drop in the direct involvement of British societies in the Netherlands during the second half of the nineteenth century, although contacts between British evangelicals and Dutch Protestants remained.

At the beginning of the twentieth century these mutual contacts were still very much existent, one of the two missionary societies that are the focus of this study being a good example of these continuing ties. The *Vereniging tot Verspreiding der Heilige Schrift* (Society for Distributing the Holy Scriptures; VVHS) was founded in 1913 by the wealthy Dutch real estate investor Marinus Heule, after a visit to England had brought him into contact with the Scripture Gift Mission (SGM). This was one of the reasons for focusing on the VVHS and its sister organization the *Bijbel Kiosk Vereniging* (Bible Kiosk Society; BKV) in order to study the Anglo-Saxon influence on religious tract distribution in the Netherlands. Moreover, the VVHS and the BKV were interesting examples, since both had an interdenominational character, made use of evangelism methods developed in Britain, and were founded in the first half of the twentieth century. This latter characteristic was important, because very little historical research has been done on religious societies during this period. This may seem to suggest that there was little to observe

in the missionary field during the period of 1900 to 1960, but this study makes clear that this is a false supposition. Around 1913, a renewed interest in evangelism can be seen. The *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (Reformed Churches in the Netherlands) organized two well attended missionary conferences during this period, and the subject also received increasing attention within the *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk* (Netherlands Reformed Church). On a practical level, however, the churches were still content to leave the actual missionary work to religious societies.

This study of the VVHS and BKV charts the ways in which the Anglo-Saxon world influenced the production and distribution of religious tracts in the Netherlands during the first half of the twentieth century. It is important to note that the ways this Anglo-Saxon influence became visible in the work of both societies differed. In the case of the VVHS a very direct British influence is revealed, with Marinus Heule finding inspiration for the establishment of his society in the work of the SGM that he had witnessed in England. Like the SGM, the VVHS concentrated on publishing and distributing illustrated portions of the bible. The VVHS also published SGM-tracts in a Dutch translation. The BKV did not rely on translations, but wrote its own tracts. However, the methods that the BKV introduced, beach evangelism and the use of a bible kiosk for tract distribution, had all been pioneered in Great Britain. The materials of other Dutch tract societies, like the *Gereformeerde Traktaatgenootschap 'Filippus' ('*Philip' Reformed Tract Society), also show similar (though more infrequent) British influences.

From 1945 onwards, however, an interesting shift becomes visible. Dutch tract publishers increasingly focused their attention on the USA as a source of inspiration. In the 1950s the aged founder Marinus Heule decided to travel to the USA to seek new inspiration for publishing religious tracts. One of the elements the VVHS adopted from the Americans was a greater emphasis on visual material. This kind of tract was not always kindly received by the Dutch public. The post-war material of the BKV shows a similar attention to design, with a growing variation in the size of tracts, the font types and the colors used. BKV-tracts also became slightly less 'earnest' in tone, with some humor starting to surface in the texts.

The were various reasons for the shift from British to American influence on Dutch religious tract publishers, not in the least the changed balance of power after World War II. By 1945 the United States had finally overtaken the British Empire as a world power, and the emerging Cold War also focused attention on America. Besides, the role the Americans had played in liberating Europe brought them sympathy and respect, as well as admiration for their technological skills. But it was not only Europe that showed an increasing interest in the American way of life. American soldiers – returning with stories about a war-torn and depressed Western-Europe – also sparked

an intense interest in Europe among American Christians. American evangelicals especially were deeply concerned about the future of Christianity in Europe, which they saw being threatened by the spread of communism and the weakness of the European churches. While some American churches offered European churches financial support and relief, like food and clothes, evangelicals tended to focus more on the spiritual needs of Europe.

Youth for Christ, an evangelical organization that was founded during the war to evangelize among American soldiers, began a tour in Western-Europe and visited the Netherlands in 1946. In the 1950s they were followed by other American evangelists like Billy Graham and Tommy Lee Osborn. They introduced new methods of evangelism, such as the mass meetings organized by Billy Graham or the Youth for Christ-rallies. Although the traditional churches in the Netherlands noticed that evangelists were far more effective in reaching the masses, they kept a critical distance from the American methods, feeling they were too theatrical and 'American'.

Nevertheless, churches had to admit that the old methods of evangelism were no longer suitable and that they were losing contact with the public. Churches and religious societies concluded that people were no longer attracted by the kind of texts that had been used in sermons and tracts in the past. Tracts were regarded as increasingly old-fashioned, although the method of tract distribution itself was not rejected. The awareness of a growing gap between the evangelical message and the public brought about a missionary revival after 1945. Churches began organizing their own activities, rather than leaving evangelism to the religious societies. Tract societies like the VVHS and the BKV could no longer take support of the churches for granted. By the end of the late 1950s, however, the gap between the churches and the public had not seemed to narrow, causing the missionary momentum to wane off again.

This fact links this study to the debate on secularization that has kept historians and social scientists busy for decades. Historians like Callum Brown and Olaf Blaschke have rightly pointed out that secularization in the sense of a slowly decreasing influence of religion on society since the nineteenth century did never exist. Rather, the nineteenth century revealed a remarkable missionary urge of assertive believers. Tract distribution was only one of the many methods and activities the evangelicals developed to spread their message in a modernizing world. Instead of a slow decline, both historians place great emphasis on the abrupt processes that occurred during the 1960s, in which churches quickly lost many of their members and much of their influence on society. This study reveals, however, that people actively engaged in missionary work experienced an increasing tension in reaching the public with a Christian message long before the 1960s, making clear that religious developments in the first half of the twentieth century deserve more attention in future historical research.